

The Legend of the Smiling Fish



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The Legend of the Smiling Fish

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The Legend of the Smiling Fish

Many, many years ago, in a land we now call China, there was once a girl called Ling Lee. She lived in a small wooden house with her mother, father, two brothers and two sisters.



Life was very different back then. Children didn't go to school because there weren't any schools, and as soon as they were old enough they worked with their parents.

Because Ling Lee was the eldest, she went out every day with her mother to catch fish. As she was pulling the net from the river, her mother sang a song.

'What's that about?' asked Ling Lee.

'The Smiling Fish,' said her mother.

Ling Lee frowned.

'Fish don't smile,' she said. 'Look.'

She took one out of the net and held it up.



'These fish don't, but in a very special place called the Lake of the Seven Rivers they smile all the time.'

'Tell me about them,' said Ling Lee and, as they slowly pulled in their net, her mother told her the story.

'When all of this land was under the sea, the creatures living in it were very happy. But what they didn't know was that far beneath them, in big black caves, lived the underground gods.

'Because these gods were surrounded by darkness, they hated happiness. When they could stand it no longer they decreed all the sea creatures must die.

‘They put their hands above their heads and pushed.

‘They pushed so hard that the bottom of the sea went close to the top and all the big creatures died.

‘They pushed even harder and the bottom of the sea went closer to the top and all the medium sized creatures died.

‘They pushed one last time and the bottom of the sea became high mountains and all the sea flowed away.

‘Satisfied they’d killed all the happiness, the underground gods were content, but what they didn’t know was that some of the little fish were still alive.

‘Because they were so small, they could live in the water that flowed down the sides of the new mountains, and when that water became the Seven Rivers and the Seven Rivers filled the valley to make the Sacred Lake, they had a new home.

‘The fish were so happy to be alive that they started to smile and they’ve been smiling ever since.’

‘Can I go and see them?’ said Ling Lee.

‘That’s not for me to decide. The Lake of the Seven Rivers is a sacred place and you can only go if the friendly gods send you their sign.’

‘What is their sign?’

‘A very special rainbow that only you will be able to see.

She picked up the basket of fish. 'Come, we have to get home before the rains start.'

That evening, while they were eating their supper, there was a storm. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed and rain poured down onto the land.

When the storm was over, the clouds moved away and Ling Lee went outside.

Above the high mountains she saw the biggest, brightest rainbow ever with its seven colours of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

'Mother, Father,' she shouted. 'Come and see the rainbow.'

Her parents stood beside her and looked up at the sky.

'I can't see a rainbow,' said her mother.

'Nor can I,' said her father.

'You can't?' said Ling Lee.

'No. We see only blue sky.'

She clapped her hands.

'Then this is a sign from the friendly gods. I'm going to see the smiling fish!'



'You're too young to go on such a journey alone,' said her father.

'I have to,' she said. 'I can't disobey the friendly gods.'

That evening, Ling Lee packed everything for her journey in a long basket on wheels. Warm clothes, dried food, rice, a net, a knife and a cooking pot. Also her special stones for lighting a fire.

'I shall go with you,' said her father.

'Can you see the rainbow?' she asked him.

He shook his head.

'Then I have to go alone.'

After Ling Lee had gone to bed, he said to his wife, 'Don't worry. I'll walk with her as far as the home village. I'm sure after that she won't want to go any further.'

The next day, when they arrived at the home village, her aunt was very surprised to see them but also very happy.

As they had dinner together, Ling Lee told them about her journey.

The next morning, they stood outside the aunt's house. The sky was blue and Ling Lee could still see the special rainbow.

'Are you sure you still want to go to the Lake of the Seven Rivers?' said her father.

'I must,' said Ling Lee. 'The gods have sent me their sign.'

'Then be safe, my child.'

He hugged her for a long time then walked back down the road.



When he had gone, Ling Lee's aunt gave her two gifts.

'Runners for your long basket,' she said. 'So you can pull it over the snow, and this is for good luck.'

She gave her a chain with a big crystal on the end. Ling Lee held it up to the light where it sparkled and shone.

'It's beautiful,' she said. 'But why is it lucky?'

'You'll find out when your need is greatest.'

Her aunt waved her goodbye and Ling Lee followed the rainbow only she could see up the mountain path.

She drank water from mountain streams, ate fruit and berries from the trees as she walked and each evening cooked dried meat and rice in her cooking pot.

As she got higher, it got colder and she had to put on her fur coat, boots and gloves. At night she lay on her basket using her coat as a blanket.

When she reached the place where the snow never melts, she put the runners under the basket wheels. This made it very easy to pull and Ling Lee was happy as she went up the mountain pass.

Once at the top, she stood and looked down at a large meadow which had three paths crossing it.

'Which way do I go now?' she said.

She looked up at the sky but it was too cloudy to see the rainbow.

'Friendly gods,' she shouted. 'Please show me the way.'

Suddenly something flew out of a cleft in a rock. It was a butterfly. A beautiful red butterfly. She saw another and this one was orange. Then yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.



Ling Lee clapped her hands.

'It's a butterfly rainbow showing me the way,' she said.

She watched the butterflies fly across the meadow along the middle path.

'Thank you, friendly gods, and thank you too, butterflies.'

As she walked, she was so happy she sang a song.

Deep below her, in their huge black caves, the underground gods heard her singing and were very angry.

'Who dares to bring happiness into our world?' said the first.

'We decreed that happiness should not exist,' said the second.

'We will stop it now,' said the third.

They all stood up and stamped with anger.



Ling Lee heard a rumbling and felt the ground shake. She stopped singing and stared around, trying to see what had made the noise.

In the new silence, the underground gods listened.

'It has stopped,' said the first.

'The happiness has gone,' said the second.

'Our anger has scared it away,' said the third.

They sat down again in their blackness and were content.

Ling Lee followed the middle path to the top of the next hill.

When she got there, she saw three more paths, each one leading to a different valley.

'Now which way shall I go?' she said and looked up at the sky for the rainbow but she saw only clouds.

'Friendly gods,' she shouted. 'Please show me the way.'

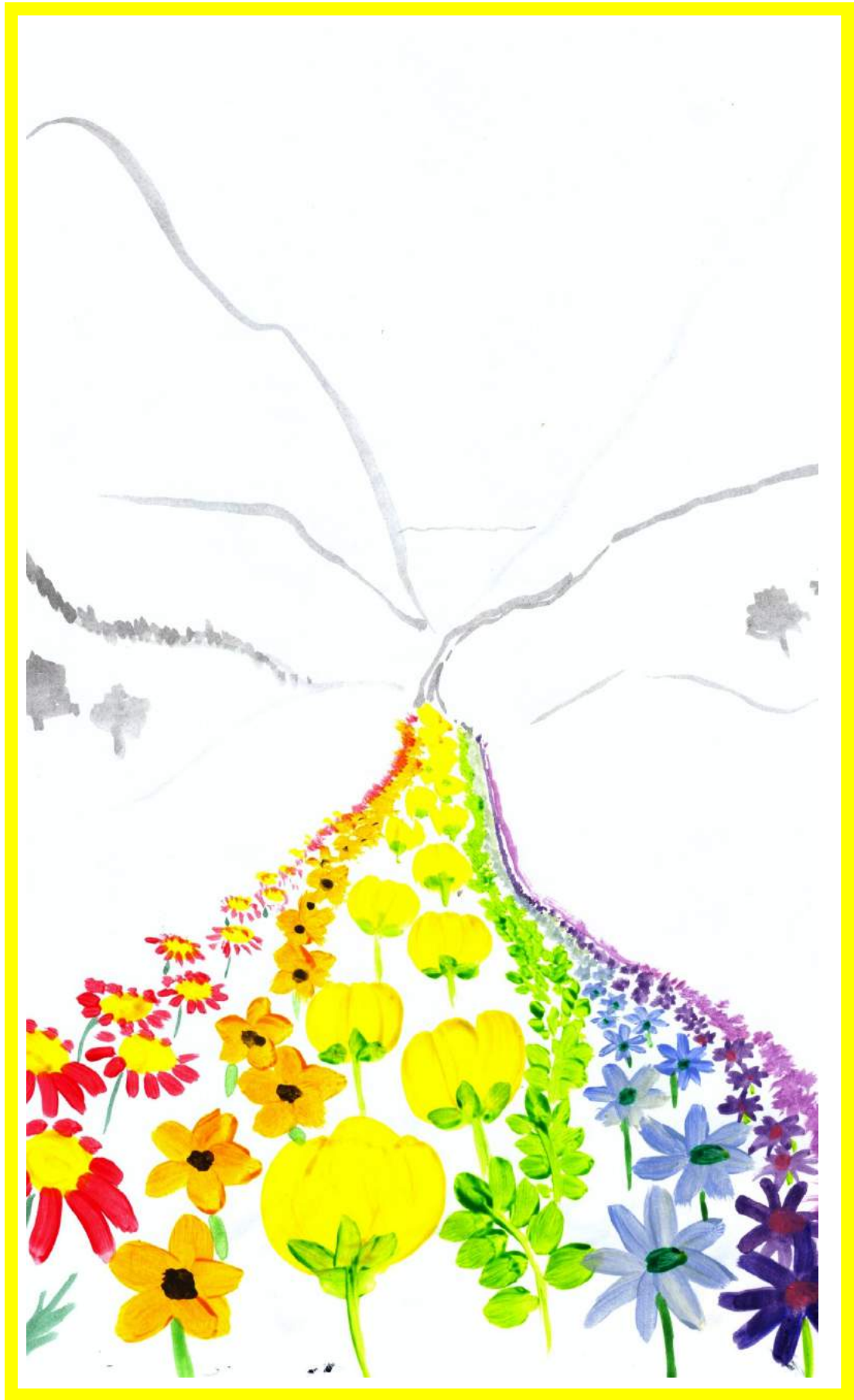
This time nothing happened.

'I'm tired,' she said. 'I'll make camp for the night under those rocks. They'll keep me dry if it rains.'

In the morning she looked up at the still cloudy sky.

'Again no rainbow,' she said. 'Friendly gods, which way shall I go?'

A flower opened near her feet. It was red. Then an orange one opened its petals, followed by yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.



'It's a flower rainbow,' she shouted as she clapped her hands. 'Thank you, friendly gods.'

Ling Lee was so happy she began to sing again, even louder than before.

In their huge black caves, the underground gods stood up and shook their fists.

'The happiness is back,' shouted the first.

'We must destroy it now,' shouted the second.

'Follow me,' said the third and they stamped their way through the caves. They stamped so hard that the mountains shook and rocks tumbled down into the meadow.

Terrified, Ling Lee stopped singing and dropped to the ground. She made herself as small as she could and put her hands over her head as, all around her, rocks bounced and crashed.

Because the singing had stopped, the gods thought they had again killed the happiness. They stopped stamping and, above them, the mountains stopped shaking and the rocks stopped falling.

Ling Lee stood up, dusted the dirt from her clothes and took hold of her basket. She went as quickly as she could down the path made by the flower rainbow.

Now that she'd left the high mountains behind her, the weather was warmer and the snow had melted. Ling Lee took the runners from her wheels and put them on top of her basket.

As she walked, she got so warm that she had to take off her coat which she also put on her basket.

At sunset, she made camp under a huge tree. Above her birds were hopping from branch to branch. One of them flew down and looked at her.

Hello,' said Ling Lee. 'Would you like some food?

She took some seeds from her basket and threw them to the bird. It ate them all so she gave it some more.

It trilled a 'thank you' and flew back to its nest.

In the morning, the bird came back with its friends so Ling Lee shared her breakfast with them.

When they'd all finished, she looked up at the sky.

'I still can't see the rainbow,' she said. 'So which way shall I go now?'

Suddenly, all the birds flew into the air and as they spread their wings Ling Lee saw that their feathers were all the colours of the rainbow. Ling Lee clapped her hands.

'It's another sign. Thank you, friendly gods.'



‘Wait for me, birds,’ she said as she packed everything into her long basket.

She followed the flying rainbow, singing as she went. The birds sang too, their trilling voices joining in with hers as they led the way across the meadow.

Their happy sounds again reached the underground gods and they were furious. They rushed out of their caves and towards Ling Lee. She saw them coming and screamed but couldn’t run away fast enough.



One of the Gods picked her up and held her in front of his face.

‘So you are the one who dares to bring happiness to our land,’ it said.

‘Happiness is not allowed,’ said the second.

‘All happiness must die,’ said the third.

‘Please don’t kill me,’ said Ling Lee. ‘I promise I won’t be happy again.’

‘We will let you live,” said the first god.

‘But you will live where the light never shines,’ said the second.

‘Your happiness cannot exist in such a place,’ said the third.

They carried her deep into their caves and put her down on the hard ground. They gave her food and water then left her alone, cold and frightened.

Ling Lee sat there for a very long time. She didn’t know how long because no sun shone inside the caves and watches hadn’t been invented.

She ate some of the food, drank some of the water, and cried many tears.

‘I want to get out,’ she sobbed. ‘I want to go back to the meadow and my basket and the rainbow birds. But how? Oh, friendly gods, please help me!’

She felt a tingle on her skin, reached inside her clothes and pulled out her crystal necklace. She held it out in front of her and light shone in the darkness in colours of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.



Her aunt's words came back to her.

'You'll find out when your need is greatest.'

Ling Lee stood up with the necklace held out in front of her. The crystal shone brighter and showed her the way. She crept along, taking great care not to make a noise, because she didn't want the underground gods to hear her.

Soon she was back out in the sunshine.

The rainbow birds were waiting for her and when she ran to them they flew into the air and trilled, very happy that she was safe.

'Thank you birds,' she said. 'But please be quiet or those horrible gods will hear you.'

In silence, they all made their way to a gap in the trees. Once there, she could see down into a large valley made by the Seven Rivers. She stood and stared at the blue, sparkling lake. She clapped her hands softly.

'I'm here at last,' she said to the birds. 'Now I can go and see the smiling fish.'

She waved farewell to them and set off down the hill.

It was a long way down to the lake and by the time she got there she was hot and thirsty.

‘The water looks wonderful,’ she said. ‘I’m going for a swim.’

She took off most of her clothes and waded into the water. It was cold but to Ling Lee it was perfect. She took a deep breath and swam down into the blue water.

At first she didn’t see anything, then a bright red fish swam up to her, curious to see who was swimming in their lake. It was smiling.



She swam to the surface, took another deep breath and dived down again.

She did this again and again, and each time she could stay underwater for longer. Each time, there were more fish there to welcome her. They swam around her and waved their fins. Ling Lee waved her hands.

When she was too tired to swim anymore, she sat on the bank so the warm sun could dry her. The fish bobbed their heads out of the water and smiled.

Ling Lee put on her clothes and, as the sun set across the lake, she ate her supper, lay down on the warm grass and fell asleep.

She stayed by the lake for three days but when she had eaten nearly all of her food, she said to the fish, 'I have to go home now.'

She looked back at the high mountains.

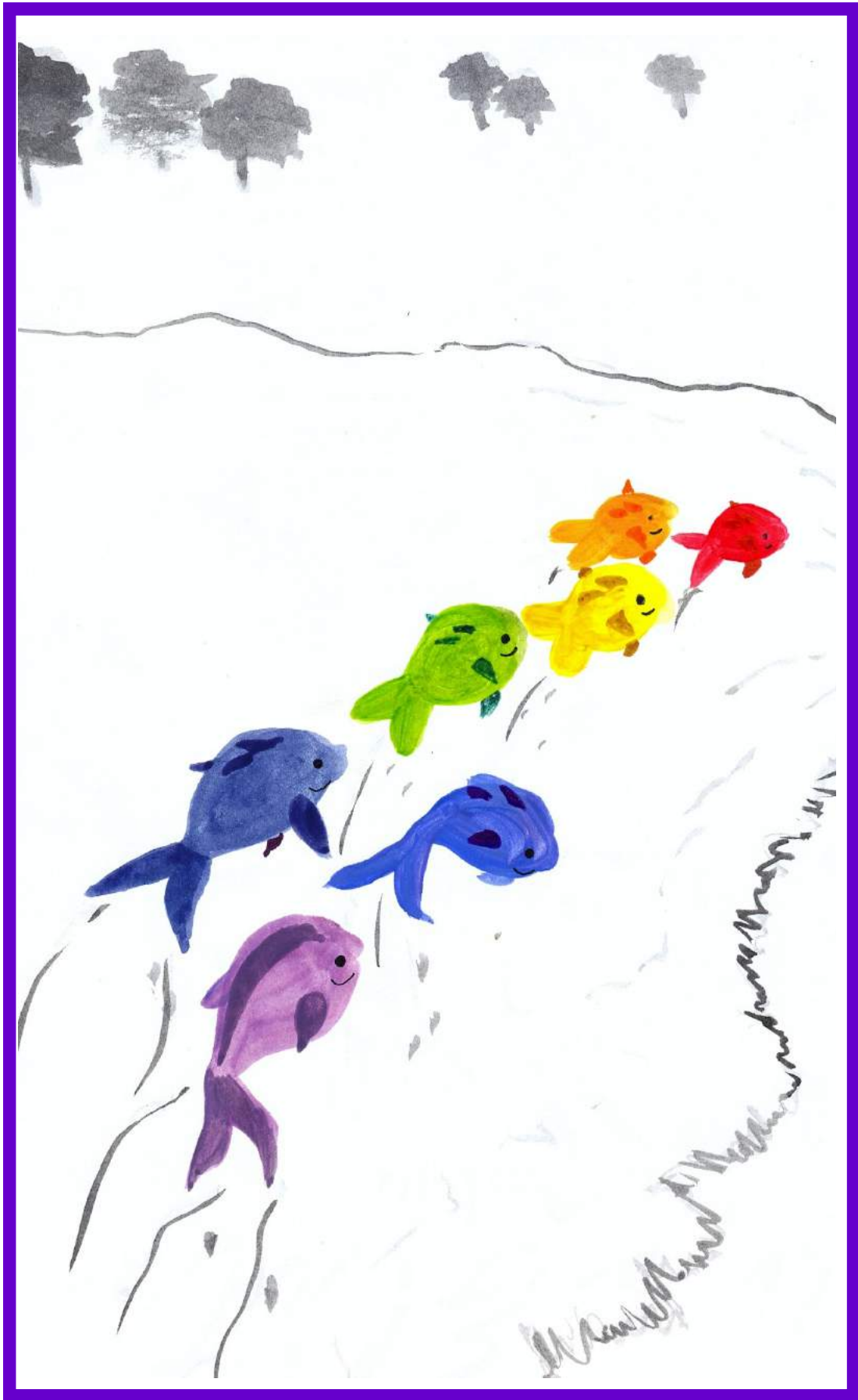
'I don't want to go that way because the underground gods will be looking for me. I must find another way home.'

A red fish leaped out of the water and splashed down again. It did it again and again and Ling Lee saw that it was moving away from her.

'Do you want me to follow you?' she said.

The fish leaped out of the water again. This time it was followed by more fish and these were orange, yellow, green, blue, violet and indigo. Ling Lee clapped her hands.

'I have to follow the rainbow of fish,' she said.



They led her to the place where the lake flowed into a wide, shallow stream.

‘Are you going to swim into the stream now?’ said Ling Lee.

The fish didn’t. They stayed in the lake and smiled at her.

‘So which way am I to go?’ she said as she looked all around her for another rainbow but, above her, the sky was still too cloudy.

She looked down into the stream but the pebbles on its bed were plain white.

‘Friendly gods,’ she shouted. ‘Please show me the way to my home.’

Then something wonderful happened. The sun came out from between the clouds and shone down onto the stream.

As it shone on the pebbles, one by one they changed colour.

The red ones appeared first and made a long line as far as she could see. The ones next to them went orange and made another line. Then yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

Ling Lee clapped her hands and laughed.

‘It’s another special rainbow,’ she shouted. ‘It’s showing me the way home.’



She looked back to where the little fish were swimming with their heads out of the water. smiling and waving their fins.

‘Thank you, smiling fish. I’ll never forget you.’

She waved back to them, turned and began her long journey home.

She walked all morning beside the stream but by midday the path was blocked by rocks. They were too steep to walk over and the water was too deep for her to wade in.

‘I could swim,’ she said. ‘But I don’t know how far I have to go.’

She looked at her long basket.

‘I wonder if that will float.’

Holding onto the rope handle, she pushed it into the water.

‘It does float,’ she said and climbed carefully on top so that she didn’t tip it over.

The stream carried her along for hours in the sunshine before it went under the mountain and into a long tunnel. It was damp and cold in there, and Ling Lee was glad when she came out into the sunshine at the other end.

She looked back to where she’d come out of the mountain but the cave was gone.

‘So no one can find the Sacred Lake,’ she said to herself.

Ling Lee stayed in her basket boat as it carried her downstream to where it joined a wide river. On the banks, there were people fishing.

‘I know where I am and I can see my mother and father.’

She waved her arms and shouted, ‘Mother, Father, I’m over here.’

They looked up, shouted and waved back. Her father waded into the river and pulled her basket boat to the shore.

‘You’re safe,’ they cried and hugged her close.



‘Of course I am,’ said Ling Lee. ‘The friendly gods looked after me.’

‘Did you see the smiling fish?’ asked her mother.

‘Yes, and when we get home, I’ll tell you all about them!’

While they ate dinner that night, she told her family all about the special rainbows, how she escaped from the underground gods and went swimming with the smiling fish.

'We want to go too,' said her brothers and sisters.

'Perhaps one day you will,' said Ling Lee. 'All you have to do is keep looking in the sky for the special rainbow, and when you see it you'll know that the friendly gods have sent you their sign. Follow it to the Lake of the Seven Rivers and the smiling fish will be waiting.'

